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Letters May Uncover Link to Escaped Spy

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Investigators Seeking Boyce Locate Papers in Bank Safe Deposit Box

Letters and other papers that investigators believe could lead to escaped spy Christopher Boyce's South African connections have been found in a safe deposit box rented by one-time Rhodesian mercenary Frank Abbott Sweeney, a source close to the case said Wednesday.

Documents filed with the U.S. District Court in Newark, N.J., in support of a search warrant obtained by U.S. Marshal's Service investigators said it is believed the box, at a bank in Tenafly, N.J., contained "letters and papers pertaining to the movements and location of Boyce."

Another document filed earlier in the same court said that Sweeney, 38, had helped Boyce obtain a passport and a South African visa under the name of Hollenbeck.

Hollenbeck is the maiden name of the Palos Verdes man's mother.

The 28-year-old Boyce has been the object of an international man-hunt since his dramatic escape from federal prison at Lompoc on Jan. 21, 1980.

Boyce, former employee of TRW Systems Group in Redondo Beach, a major defense contractor, was convicted of selling secret details of a CIA satellite to Soviet agents in Mexico City.

The affidavits filed in Newark indicated that Sweeney, arrested last Thursday on firearms charges, has been cooperating fully in the Boyce case and voluntarily informed investigators of the location of the safe deposit box.

Sweeney and Boyce served time together in federal prison at Terminal Island in 1977, according to court documents.

In Washington, D.C., Marshal's Service spokesman Bill Dempsey said he could not comment on any aspect of what he called "an active and ongoing" case.

Government affidavits released after Sweeney's arrest last week in his Closter, N.J., home, said that federal agents believe Sweeney helped Boyce flee from the United States to South Africa. The documents said Sweeney himself visited South Africa less than a month after Boyce escaped from prison and remained there four months.

Sweeney visited South Africa again in January, posing as an anthropologist, according to the court papers.

One of two letters by Sweeney entered into the court records placed Boyce in an area of the Orange Free State, which borders on

the independent black nation of Lesotho.

"Wanted" posters describing Boyce have been posted in South African police stations since last August.

There have been reports that Boyce also had been sighted or was being sought in various places in the United States and Mexico.

In October of last year, Boyce telephoned New York Times reporter Robert Lindsay at his Los Angeles home and told him he had been "all over" but would not say where he was calling from. Lindsay, who had interviewed Boyce extensively for a book about the spy case, said he recognized the voice as that of the escapee.

At that time, the Marshal's Service had a special 11-man task force assigned to the Boyce case and was theorizing that he still was hiding out in Southern California.